

Christmas Day – “Not Just for Christmas Day”

Along By Merry Christmas Time – Henry Lawson 1913

Along by merry Christmas time they buy the aged goose,
And boil the dread plum pudding, because of ancient use.
But to sneer at old time customs would be nothing but a crime,
For the memory of the Past is all bound up in Christmas time.

Then Jim comes home from shearing, and he puts a few away,
With Dad, perhaps, or Uncle, but they're right on Christmas Day:
For be it on the Never, or 'neath the church bells' chime,
The family gets together, if they can, at Christmas time.

And, after tea at Christmas, they clear the things away
And play the dear old silly games our grand-folk used to play
And Dad gives a recitation that used to be the joy
Of all the Western countryside, when Father was a boy.

Along by merry Christmas time, and ere the week is o'er
We meet and fix up quarrels that each was sorry for.
Our hearts are filled with kindness and forgiveness sublime,
For no one knows where one may be next merry Christmas time.

... written by Henry Lawson in 1913 – 100 years ago. And is Christmas any different a century later? Is it just another case of ‘we must do it this year because we did it last year’ and ‘we did it last year because we did it the year the before’ and ‘we must do it this year so that next year we can do what we did last year’ ...

Yes – and the similarities are still there 100 years later – the goose, the plum pudding – all so inappropriate for summer in Australia. Jim, Dad and Uncle all ‘cleaning up’ for Christmas day, silly old games and the Annual Christmas Recitation.

My mother only knew one joke – and we heard it every Christmas Day whether we liked it or not –

“it was Christmas Day during the war and a dear lady invited three members of the Air Force home for dinner. As she carved the turkey she asked the first airman “and what’s your job in the Air Force?” “I’m a pilot” he replied. “Good, then since you are up the front of the plane you should receive some of the breast”. Turning to the second serviceman, she asked the same question. “I’m a Wing Commander” he replied. “Good, you deserve a wing”. Then turning to the third member and asking him his job he replied – “I’m a rear gunner – and I’m not hungry!!”.

Yes – it came out every year, and every year we had to laugh as if we’d never heard it before.

And 100 years on we still have the crazy materialistic frenzy, as we buy even more trash to give and receive to and from friends who don’t really need any more junk in their lives. I remember a pair of socks that went back and forth from myself to an uncle for several years until one of us actually decided to wear them.

Then there’s the “just because we had dinner here last year, do we HAVE to have dinner at Myrtle’s this year? And if Uncle Fred comes, there’s no way I’ll sit next to Aunt Jean”. Talk about “peace and goodwill to all men!” If we can believe what Henry Lawson says, this sort of thing has been going on since time immemorial.

Yes – these maybe all the things that DO happen at Christmas, but do you sense in all these stories what DOESN’T seem to happen at Christmas? Nowhere in ‘all the above’ is there any mention about Christmas being a celebration of the birthday of Jesus, the ‘person’ whom we believe was sent by God to be the Saviour of mankind. Just presents and food.

And I wonder how many families around the world today WILL be celebrating Christmas as a celebration of Jesus’ birth? Far too few I suspect. Is it just another season for buying up big, ripping parcels apart, gorging oneself then sleeping it off? Far too many I suspect. And for how many people does Christmas Day finish at midnight tonight, starting way back in October or earlier, then comes a sudden stop tonight, with all the cards, decorations and gift wrapping paper looking so horrible out of date tomorrow. Have you ever tried listening to Bing Crosby sing “White Christmas” on Boxing Day? It’s painful!

And as if “Christmas” hasn’t been a good enough excuse to buy up big, there’s always the Boxing Day sales. Funny. I always thought that Boxing Day was on December 26th when traditionally, boxes of gifts were given to the poor. But no – David Jones started their Boxing Day sale at 6pm last night, and Myer’s was underway at 9am this morning!

The RSPCA used to have a slogan “a pet is not just for Christmas Day”, and I believe that for true Christians, Christmas Day is not just for Christmas Day. Surely the birth of Christ is something we should celebrate EVERY day? You know that expression when someone is enjoying life “it’s Christmas every day”, or the person who is having a run of good luck “all his Christmases have come at once”. For Christians, Christmas Day is not the end of the Christmas season, but just the beginning.

Today marks the beginning of our twelve day celebration Christmas, “The Twelve Days of Christmas” which may seem a little confusing because we’ve been singing that carol since BEFORE Christmas day. Even I used to think that the 12 days of Christmas were the 12 days leading UP to Christmas, with a new present every day.

So if we really want to be fussy about celebrating Christmas in a Christian way, maybe we should go back to the early days of the church and see how they used to celebrate Christmas. Well, surprise surprise – for the first few centuries of our church there was NO Christmas day, and for good reason. When Jesus was born it seemed like it was just the birth of another child. Some shepherds somehow got a message and headed to the stable to take a look, and according to tradition some wise men turned up with presents. Well that’s what Christmas cards would have us believe. But think of it – there’s no way the three wise men could have turned up at the stable on the night Jesus was born. Take a look at any map and work out the distance from Persia to Bethlehem – 1,500 km as the crow flies, more like 2,500km by road, travelling only at night by camel and guided by a star – hardly a day trip! Most theologians believe that the three wise men arrived some 12 – 18 months after Jesus’ birth.

And it wasn’t until 30 years after his birth with the baptism by John the Baptist that anyone had any real inkling that Jesus was the Son of God and that his birthday might be worth celebrating.

Another factor: Birthdays were a not a big thing in the ancient world, and Christians did not begin celebrating the birthday of Jesus until several centuries

after his life, death, and resurrection. With no exact record of the date of his birth, the Christians calculated the time of his conception from a spiritual theory which said that the conception in the womb of Mary would occur at the same time of the year as the anniversary of creation, which they believed to have been at Passover time. That put the time of Jesus's conception at the same time of year as his death, somewhere around March 25th. Add another nine months gives you December 25th according to our calendar.

By coincidence, that put Christmas smack in the middle of the winter solstice festivals, pagan festivals in the Mediterranean world. Bishops of the church in the fourth century no doubt figured that it would be good to keep Christians busy with Christian festivals, to help keep them from getting tangled up in the pagan ones.

Christian Christmas symbols then began to merge with solstice symbols. The pagan fertility tree gets a star or an angel put on top of it, and the dominant Christmas figure is still Santa Claus, a reincarnation of the Nordic god Thor, the god of the hearth. Some Christians merged him with one of their saints, Nicholas who never had anything to do with elves, reindeer and snowmen.

And so Christmas may sound all very pagan and undesirable, but the Christians of the time had a secret weapon up their sleeves that challenged the sun-worshippers - the stories of the Nativity in the Gospels: the announcement of Jesus' birth to the shepherds in Luke's Gospel, and the visit of the Magi in Matthew's Gospel. John's Gospel goes back to the beginning: the Word of God being with God before it became incarnate in human flesh and dwelt among us.

These scriptures inspired a host of prayers and songs that expanded into a whole season between December 25 and January 6. How Christians have treasured these stories, savoured them, made themselves hungry for their telling by fasting from them the rest of the year until in this season they could be told again. Just like Dad's annual story in Henry Lawson's poem, and my mother and the Air Force guests.

But the one word that Christians sang over and over again in this season tells us the why and what of this festival was all about: That word was "Hodie" —or "today" It is a word is used repeatedly in ancient Christian sermons.

Today Christ is born:
today the Saviour has appeared:

today the Angels sing,
today the righteous rejoice,

The word “Today” echoes through the songs that come down to us through the centuries. It has never meant: “On that day many years ago.” It means: “Today this is happening.” Right here and right now. An old song says, “Today true peace has come down to us from heaven, today the heavens drip honey upon the entire world.” How’s that for an image we can feel and taste? “Today the heavens drip honey.”

Can we make this word “hodie”, “today”, our own? Can we believe that it is today that the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us? Can we let Christmas burst out for next 24 hours, and then forever.

Can we look each day at the stories in the newspapers or on television or on the internet and say to them, “Hodie”, today the word of God has rolled out a swag in our midst?

Can we stand up in the face of wars that drag on in various parts of the world, where people are again forced away from their homes and babies are born and often killed while hiding out in rough shelters; can we stand up and shout “Hodie”, today God takes flesh in solidarity with your victims, and your deadly power is broken?

Can we stand up in the face of callous politicians who say their good intentions rule out any need for a proper apology.

Can we stand up and shout “Hodie”, today a light shines into the darkness and the shame you have dragged us into is lifted?

Can we stand up in the face of the violence and callousness and greed that leaves millions hungry and fearful and degraded tonight, and shout “Hodie”, today the salvation of the world is born and justice will be done on earth as in heaven.

Can we look straight into the face of evil in our day—in all its guises—and shout out, “Hodie”, today you are finished, washed up, washed out in the waters that burst when a baby was born today, drowned in the waters that poured down baptism on us?

Let us keep the festival. Let us keep it in these weeks with the stories of Scripture, with the Bible open to Isaiah and to Matthew’s and Luke’s first

chapters and to the opening page of the Gospel of John. Let us keep it with the Christmas songs and carols that now can be fully sung in our homes and churches. Let us keep it with the gifts of time for one another that the festival gives us. Let us keep it with feasting and merriment. Let us also keep it with some beautiful silence. And let us keep it by standing confidently, and affirming our faith in the God who takes flesh among us, today!

Maybe Henry Lawson got it right when he said –

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